



# Pre-Colonial Perspectives on Global Media and Cultural Representation

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## Abstract

## Original Research Article

This study examines the evolving dynamics of global media and cultural representation through a pre-colonial lens, focusing on the impact of colonialism and the emergence of hybrid media forms. The rationale for this research is grounded in the recognition that pre-colonial communication systems, such as oral traditions and symbolic representations, were integral to shaping cultural identities, but were disrupted by colonial powers and modern global media structures. To address this, the study employs a theoretical framework combining Cultural Memory Theory (CMT) and Post-Colonial Media Theory (PCMT), offering a dual perspective on how collective memory and post-colonial identities have been mediated in global media. Using a library research approach, the study analyses historical and contemporary examples of media representation, drawing on case studies from diverse global regions such as Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East. The study argues that while global media has fostered new forms of cultural hybridity, colonial legacies persist, often reinforcing stereotypes and unequal power dynamics in media representation. In conclusion, the study argues that global media practices continue to be influenced by colonial structures of representation, but also presents opportunities for cultural re-appropriation and resistance through hybrid forms. The study recommends that modern media scholars, cultural institutions, and governments should invest in preserving and revitalising indigenous oral traditions and communication systems, among others.

**Keywords:** Pre-colonial, perspectives, global media, cultural representation, colonialism.

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## Introduction

The study of global media and cultural representation is usually framed within the context of colonialism and its prevalent impact on modern media structures. However, an increasing body of research has begun to highlight the importance of pre-colonial perspectives that provide a broader understanding of how societies engaged with media, representation, and cultural exchange prior to European imperial expansion.

This is because pre-colonial societies developed sophisticated systems of media and representation, often rooted in oral traditions, visual arts, and ritualistic practices, which served as key tools for social cohesion, identity formation, and cultural expression (Akpabio, 2003; Golkarian, 2015). In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, the role of oral historians and storytellers was pivotal in preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge, historical narratives, and societal values across generations (Césaire, 2001; Ohiagu & Okorie, 2014;



Asemah, Kente & Nkwam-Uwaoma, 2021). Similarly, in pre-colonial India, texts such as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* not only conveyed moral and religious teachings but also provided a framework for political and cultural representation within the subcontinent (Banerjee, 2025). These early forms of media were essential for constructing collective identities and influencing how communities understood their place within the world.

Meanwhile, the global exchange of ideas and cultural practices during the pre-colonial era occurred along well-established trade routes, such as the Silk Road and the trans-Saharan trade routes, which facilitated the movement of goods, art, and ideas across continents (Hesmondhalgh, 2019; Pomeranz, 2021). These exchanges, though not framed as “media” in the modern sense, were crucial in shaping perceptions of distant societies. For instance, Islamic scholars and artists contributed significantly to the development of scientific knowledge, visual arts, and architectural styles, which later influenced European Renaissance thought (Ettinghausen, Grabar & Jenkins-Madina, 2003). The impact of these early exchanges underlines the dynamic, interconnected world that existed long before the imposition of colonial structures.

However, colonialism, when it emerged, did not erase the existing media systems but rather interacted with them in ways that often distorted or appropriated indigenous forms of representation (Golkarian, 2015; Asemah et al., 2021). Colonial powers frequently manipulated cultural symbols and media to serve imperial agendas, constructing stereotyped and simplistic representations of colonised peoples (Tomlinson, 2002; Bhabha, 2004; Said, 2019). This process of “othering” often distorted the rich cultural narratives of pre-colonial societies, resulting in a global media system that reinforced colonial ideologies of domination and subjugation. Thus, examining pre-colonial media systems offers an opportunity to reclaim and reconstruct a more accurate and nuanced history of global cultural representation.

In contemporary media studies, Curran & Couldry (2003) opined that the legacies of colonialism continue to influence how media and cultural representations are produced and

consumed worldwide. However, by revisiting the media practices of pre-colonial societies, we can begin to challenge the long-standing colonial biases that have shaped contemporary global media landscapes. This paper aims to explore these pre-colonial perspectives by investigating case studies from a variety of geographical and cultural contexts. In doing so, it will demonstrate how non-Western societies engaged with media, not as passive recipients of colonial representations, but as active participants in a complex, pre-existing network of global cultural exchange.

Ultimately, this paper seeks to interrogate these pre-colonial understandings and practices, providing another perspective to the early forms of cultural exchange and representation in global media. By drawing on patterns from various contexts—particularly Africa—this research aims to broaden the scope of global media studies and challenge the dominant colonial-centric paradigms.

## Review of Related Literature

### Pre-Colonial Media Systems in Africa

The concept of “media” as we understand it today—comprising mass communication platforms such as newspapers, television, and social media—emerged in the post-colonial period (Akpabio, 2003; Asemah et al., 2021). However, according to Asemah et al., (2021) long before the introduction of Western forms of media, various African societies and other pre-colonial cultures around the world had their own systems of communication. These systems, though not always categorized as “media” in the modern sense, played critical roles in preserving cultural values, disseminating knowledge, and maintaining social cohesion (Herman & McChesney, 1997; Mjøs, 2023).

One of the most significant aspects of pre-colonial media systems was their reliance on oral traditions. Oral communication, including storytelling, proverbs, chants, and songs, served as the primary means of transmitting information (Abdullahi, Kunga & Degri, 2021). These oral forms of media were deeply embedded in the social fabric of pre-colonial societies. According

to Mahto & Mahawar (2025), oral traditions were not merely a means of communication but also a way of reinforcing societal norms and values. Storytellers, often regarded as community elders or griots, held significant social status, as their narratives could shape perceptions, teach lessons, and preserve history. This oral tradition was not static; it evolved with time, incorporating new experiences and ideas into the existing cultural framework (Ekwelie, 2012; Okediji, 2017).

Another significant form of pre-colonial media was the use of symbols and material culture to convey messages. For example, art, including rock paintings, sculptures, and the design of everyday objects, often contained deep symbolic meanings. In pre-colonial Africa, societies such as the Yoruba and the Akan used visual symbols, like adinkra symbols in Ghana, to communicate wisdom, beliefs, and social codes (Slater, 2019; Asemah, et al., 2021). These symbols, passed down through generations, formed a system of communication that was particularly effective in societies where literacy was limited or non-existent. Furthermore, Michael & Joseph (2006) asserted that the use of art as a form of media often extended to ritualistic contexts, where dance, music, and other performance arts were employed to convey societal values and engage audiences in collective meaning-making.

In addition to oral and symbolic forms, Asemah, et al. (2021) added that in pre-colonial African societies also utilized communal gatherings, such as markets, festivals and even ceremonies (marriage and funeral ceremonies) as media tools. These events, such as the annual harvest festivals or traditional rites of passage, served not only as social rituals but also as platforms for the dissemination of information. According to Akpabio (2003), these gatherings facilitated the transmission of news, political decisions, and social expectations, often using a combination of spoken word, dance, and symbolic acts. Michael & Joseph (2006) highlights that these public performances acted as both entertainment and a means of reinforcing the social order. The communal nature of these events allowed for a shared understanding and collective participation, reinforcing social unity

and cohesion. Furthermore, the role of ritual in pre-colonial media systems cannot be overstated. According to Sanusi (2013), religious and spiritual rituals were key forms of communication that linked individuals with their ancestors, the divine, and the cosmos. These rituals, often involving the performance of sacred dances, sacrifices, or prayers, served as media that conveyed messages of power, legitimacy, and divine approval. In many societies, the performance of these rituals was highly public and involved the participation of entire communities, ensuring that the messages conveyed were received by a wide audience.

Nevertheless, pre-colonial media systems were also inherently local and decentralised, with communication often occurring within the confines of small communities. As such, these media systems were tailored to the specific needs, values, and concerns of the people within each society. Unlike modern mass media, which is often centralised and uniform, pre-colonial media was highly contextual, grounded in local knowledge and communal relationships. As Asemah, et al. (2021) points out, this localized form of communication created a more direct and intimate connection between the media producer and the audience. The role of the storyteller, the griot, or the ritual specialist was not just that of a passive conveyor of messages but a central figure in shaping and mediating social and cultural understanding.

However, despite the diversity and richness of pre-colonial media systems, these communication practices were often overlooked or devalued during the colonial era, when Western forms of media took precedence. The introduction of print media, radio, and television in colonial contexts often led to the marginalization of indigenous communication systems (Akpabio, 2023). However, recent scholarship has highlighted the importance of reviving and preserving these traditional forms of media in post-colonial societies. Scholars such as Kargbo (2022) have argued for the need to reconsider pre-colonial media systems as vital cultural assets that offer insights into indigenous knowledge systems, governance structures, and social dynamics.

## Colonial Disruption of Media Representation

The legacy of colonialism has had far-reaching effects on multiple facets of society, particularly within media representation. Colonial powers, in their bid to dominate and control, systematically shaped how colonized peoples were represented in global media. These depictions were not only forms of control but also integral to the maintenance of colonial power structures.

Colonialism involved more than just the exploitation of resources; it extended into the realm of culture, where colonial powers sought to dictate the portrayal of colonized societies through the lens of Western superiority. Said's (2019) work *Orientalism* examined how the West constructed the "Orient" as exotic, backward, and in need of Western intervention. These representations were not limited to literature but permeated visual media, reinforcing stereotypes of the "Other." Said (2019) argued that these narratives justified colonial domination by depicting colonized peoples as uncivilized and needing guidance from their colonizers. According to Gabay (2018), the colonial media system did not only shape the identity of colonized nations but also created a dichotomy between the "civilized" West and the "primitive" East, a distinction that continues to manifest in modern media portrayals of non-Western societies.

Recent scholarship has built on these ideas, exploring how colonial disruptions continue to influence the media landscape in the 21st century. Asemah, Nkwam-Uwaoma, Kente & Amah (2024) noted that although the formal systems of colonialism have ended, the patterns of representation established during colonial rule persist in contemporary media. For example, non-Western characters in global cinema and television are often relegated to roles that reinforce outdated stereotypes, such as the "noble savage" or the "exotic other" (Shome, 2016). These representations reflect a lingering colonial mindset that continues to marginalize non-Western identities in favour of a Western-centric worldview.

More so, postcolonial theorists have critiqued the way Western media continues to represent the global South, often through a

framework shaped by colonial perspectives. One critical aspect is the way colonial powers established a hierarchy of culture, positioning their own culture as the norm and marginalizing those of the colonized. This led to a culture of media representations that minimized or erased the complexities of colonized societies. As Asemah et al., (2024) articulated, colonized peoples were often depicted in a state of "cultural inferiority," and this portrayal remained embedded in the media long after colonialism officially ended. In the same vein, scholars like Mansell & Raboy (2011) and Markowska (2018) emphasize the persistence of this cultural inferiority in modern-day media. Mansell & Raboy (2011) highlights how the historical context of colonialism informs contemporary stereotypes in films and television, with black, Indigenous, and other marginalized groups often portrayed in subservient or villainous roles. Furthermore, Markowska (2018) suggests that even in postcolonial media productions, the influence of colonial disruptions is evident, particularly when these narratives are marketed to global audiences who may still hold colonial-era biases. In this context, media representation of former colonies is often shaped more by Western commercial interests than by a genuine desire to represent cultural diversity accurately.

## Theoretical Framework

To begin this argument and discussion, it is important to anchor this paper on pertinent theories; hence the cultural memory theory (CMT) and the post-colonial media theory (PCMT) are relevant to this discourse.

Cultural memory theory explores how societies collectively remember and interpret their pasts through cultural practices, media, and symbols. Originating with Maurice Halbwachs in the early 20th century, who argued that memory, is socially constructed rather than merely individual (Halbwachs, 1992), the theory highlights the role of collective memory in shaping group identities and national narratives. Scholars like Jan Assmann (1995) and Aleida Assmann (2008) further developed the concept, emphasising how memory is transmitted and maintained through cultural artefacts such as

media, monuments, and rituals. This theory also examines how memories can be manipulated for political or ideological purposes, with media acting as a key vehicle in shaping collective understandings of history and identity (Erll, 2011). In the context of this study, in the pre-colonial world, societies had their own "media ecosystems" that shaped how individuals and communities understood their place in the world.

Postcolonial media theory critiques how media perpetuates colonial ideologies and power imbalances between the West and formerly colonised societies. Rooted in the work of theorists like Edward Said (1978), who explored the concept of "Orientalism" to examine how the West constructs the "Other," the theory addresses the role of media in reinforcing racial stereotypes, cultural dominance, and the marginalisation of non-Western voices. Homi Bhabha (2004) and Gayatri Spivak (1988) further developed postcolonial critiques, emphasising the need for decolonising media representations and giving space for counter-hegemonic narratives from postcolonial subjects. The theory advocates for a more inclusive media landscape that reflects the complexities of postcolonial identities and histories. In the same vein, in relation to this study, postcolonial media theory interrogates how colonial powers reshaped cultural narratives through media and representation.

Therefore, the two theories explore how media, both before and after colonialism, serves as a tool for the construction and dissemination of cultural memory. Pre-colonial societies, despite lacking modern mass media, used various mediums—oral traditions, visual arts, rituals, storytelling, and even architectural forms—to represent cultural identity, values, and historical narratives. Colonial forces imposed new media structures, narratives, and representations, erasing or marginalizing these pre-existing frameworks.

## Methodology

This study adopts a comprehensive library-based research design, which involves a thorough review of relevant scholarly articles, studies, and publications to deepen the understanding of a

specific phenomenon (Asemah, Gujbawu, Ekharefo & Okpanachi, 2022; Aríjeníwà, Pepple & Asemah, 2023). This approach is well-suited for the research as it allows for the synthesis of existing knowledge, thereby offering critical insights into reputation management, which can serve as a valuable resource for both practitioners and scholars.

## Discussion

Perspective is a critical factor in understanding global media and cultural representation in pre-colonial societies. From available literature, it can be seen that the relationship between media, culture, and representation has long been a topic of interest within scholarly discourse. In particular, the historical and cultural dynamics that predate colonialism offer critical insight into how societies understood and transmitted their cultural narratives. Prior to the colonial era, different societies across the globe had their own systems of communication, cultural memory, and representation that were deeply tied to local customs, oral traditions, and communal practices. The global media landscape as we know it today—characterized by mass communication technologies, commercialised media, and a predominantly Western-centric worldview—was not always the norm.

## Pre-Colonial Media Systems: Oral Traditions and Symbolic Representation

In pre-colonial societies, media systems were not bound to the technological infrastructure of modern times. Instead, communication was deeply intertwined with oral traditions, performances, rituals, and symbolic representations. As Akpabio (2003) and Asemah et al. (2021) have noted, African cultures, for example, utilised oral storytelling as a primary method of transmitting knowledge, cultural values, and historical narratives. These oral traditions, which included myths, songs, and performances, were not merely forms of communication but also vehicles for shaping collective memory and identity. In these societies, cultural representation was dynamic,

constantly evolving as it was passed down through generations.

Similarly, in the context of South Asia, the use of oral epics, such as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, played a crucial role in the transmission of cultural values, religious beliefs, and historical events (Banerjee, 2025). These texts, though often shared orally, were deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric of the region, creating a powerful form of media that resonated across social and political boundaries. Thus, pre-colonial societies utilised forms of media that were both participatory and communal, deeply tied to cultural identity and collective memory.

### **Cultural Memory and the Construction of Identity**

The theory of cultural memory, as outlined by Assmann (1995) and further developed by Erll (2011), is particularly relevant when discussing pre-colonial systems of media and cultural representation. Cultural memory theory posits that societies maintain a shared sense of identity and history through the collective remembrance of cultural symbols, rituals, and narratives. In pre-colonial societies, these memories were often transmitted through oral traditions, sacred texts, art, and communal practices, which allowed individuals to maintain a deep connection to their collective past. Assmann (1995) argues that cultural memory is essential for the construction of identity, both at the individual and societal levels. In this sense, pre-colonial media systems were not simply tools for communication; they were also integral to the formation and reinforcement of identity. For instance, the oral storytelling traditions in many African cultures (as discussed by Michael & Joseph, 2006) were not just mechanisms for conveying messages but also repositories of historical events, cultural values, and social norms. These stories functioned as a form of collective memory, where the past was not only recalled but actively shaped and retold to affirm cultural identity.

By contrast, the rise of colonial powers disrupted these systems of cultural memory and representation. Colonialism imposed new forms of media, communication, and cultural

representation that sought to overwrite or suppress indigenous modes of knowledge transmission. This disruption aligns with the critiques of colonialism presented by Césaire (2000), who highlighted the systematic erasure of indigenous cultures and histories in favour of European narratives.

### **The Emergence of Hybrid Forms: Global Media and Cultural Exchange**

The pre-colonial world was not static in terms of cultural exchange. While the modern conception of global media was yet to emerge, societies were far from isolated. Trade routes, such as those established through the Silk Road and maritime routes in Africa and Asia, facilitated the exchange of cultural symbols, art, and ideas. These exchanges allowed for the emergence of hybrid forms of cultural representation that were neither purely local nor purely foreign. For instance, in the Islamic world, the fusion of Greek, Persian, and Indian knowledge created a unique cultural and intellectual tradition that flourished long before European colonial expansion (Ettinghausen, Grabar, & Jenkins-Madina, 2003).

This hybridisation of cultural forms challenges the Western-centric notion that globalisation and media exchange are purely modern phenomena. As Mjøs (2023) and Pomeranz (2021) argue, the cultural exchanges that took place prior to the colonial era were also global in nature, though they were framed by different power structures and geopolitical landscapes. In this sense, the pre-colonial world exhibited forms of global media—or more accurately, global cultural exchange—that were often inclusive and multifaceted.

### **Post-Colonial Media Theory: The Impact of Colonialism on Cultural Representation**

The advent of colonialism drastically altered global media and cultural representation. As Bhabha (2004) suggests, colonial powers imposed their own systems of representation, often creating a binary opposition between the "civilized" West and the "primitive" East. These colonial narratives, which sought to portray

colonised societies as "backward" or "exotic," were integral to the maintenance of colonial control and the creation of new cultural hierarchies. This is evident in the ways that Western media outlets, even today, often represent non-Western cultures through distorted or stereotypical lenses.

In post-colonial media theory, scholars like Spivak (1988) have highlighted the importance of giving voice to the subaltern—the marginalised voices that were silenced during colonial rule. Spivak's critique, which asks "Can the Subaltern Speak?", resonates with the concept of hybridity in post-colonial media, where formerly colonised peoples are beginning to reclaim their cultural narratives and represent themselves on their own terms. However, as Tomlinson (2002) and Said (2019) suggest, the power dynamics of global media still favour the West, making it difficult for truly authentic, decolonised representations to flourish.

The emergence of global media platforms in the post-colonial world, especially through social media, has allowed for more equitable representation, but it also perpetuates a form of digital colonialism (Shome, 2016). While these platforms have opened up spaces for cultural exchange, they are still dominated by Western media conglomerates, which continue to frame global media representation within a largely Western context (Curran & Couldry, 2003). Thus, while hybridity offers a potential for more inclusive representations, the power structures underlying global media continue to shape the way cultures are represented, often preserving the inequalities established during the colonial era.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, this study argues that pre-colonial perspectives on global media and cultural representation reveal a rich tapestry of diverse, complex, and often hybrid systems of cultural expression. Prior to colonialism, societies utilised oral traditions, symbolic representations, and communal practices to represent their identities and histories. Cultural memory theory, as articulated by Assmann and Erll, provides valuable insight into how these

systems of representation functioned as mechanisms for identity formation and social cohesion. However, colonialism disrupted these systems, imposing new modes of representation that sought to erase or distort indigenous cultural narratives. While post-colonial media theory highlights the ongoing struggles for authentic representation, the hybridity of cultural exchange offers a potential avenue for reclaiming lost voices and reshaping global media representation in more equitable ways. In line with the foregoing, the following recommendations are made:

1. Modern media scholars, cultural institutions, and governments should invest in preserving and revitalising indigenous oral traditions and communication systems. This could involve creating digital archives for oral histories, myths, and songs, particularly those from cultures with rich oral traditions, such as African, Indigenous American, and Pacific Islander communities.
2. Governments and cultural organisations should promote public engagement with cultural memory through exhibitions, festivals, and public discussions about the role of memory in identity formation. These platforms could focus on how different societies remember their pasts and how these memories shape national and cultural identities.
3. To ensure that cultural hybridity is reflected in a balanced way, there should be a stronger emphasis on global media partnerships that respect cultural diversity. Partnerships between media companies, filmmakers, and creators from different parts of the world can help facilitate the exchange of ideas and aesthetic forms.

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